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Honduras Army Linked to Death Of 200 Leftists

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MIAMI, May 1 — The Honduran Army high command maintained a network of secret jails, special interrogators and kidnapping teams who detained and killed nearly 200 suspected leftists between 1980 and 1984, according to a former Honduran Army interrogator who says he was part of the network.

The account of the Honduran, Florencio Caballero, may be the fullest yet given of how army and police units were authorized to organize death squads that seized, interrogated and killed suspected leftists in Honduras. Argentine and Chilean trainers taught the Honduran Army kidnapping and "elimination" techniques, Mr. Caballero said.

His account also sheds light on the role of the Central Intelligence Agency in training and advising a group of Honduran Army interrogators and an army anti-terrorist team. But Mr. Caballero added that the C.I.A. explicitly forbade the use of physical torture or assassination.

Mr. Caballero, 29 years old, says he was a sergeant in Honduran Army intelligence until 1984 and that he was trained by the Central Intelligence Agency. Much of his highly detailed account was confirmed by three American and two Honduran officials.

Kathy Pherson, a spokesman for the C.I.A., refused in a telephone interview to confirm or deny the C.I.A.'s involvement in training or advising the Honduran police and army. But she explicitly denied any C.I.A. involvement in, or sanctioning of, the use of torture or assassination.

The C.I.A. had access to secret army jails and to written reports summarizing the interrogation of suspected leftists, according to Mr. Caballero and two American officials. The Americans also said the C.I.A. knew the Honduran Army was killing prisoners.

The C.I.A.'s role appeared to be ambiguous. The American officials said that at one point in 1983 the C.I.A. demanded the killings stop. In 1984, a C.I.A. agent was recalled from Honduras after a prisoner's relative identified him as having visited a secret jail, two American and one Honduran official said. According to Mr. Caballero, the agent was a regular contact between the interrogators and the C.I.A. It appears likely, therefore, that the C.I.A. was aware that killings were continuing.

Mr. Caballero said his superior officers ordered him and other members of army intelligence units to conceal their participation in death squads from C.I.A. advisers. He added that he was sent to Houston for six months in 1979 to be trained by eight people he described as C.I.A. instructors in interrogation techniques.

"They prepared me in interrogation to end the use of physical torture in Honduras — they taught psychological methods," Mr. Caballero said of his American training. "So when we had someone important, we hid him from the Americans, interrogated him ourselves and then gave him to a death squad to kill."

No Comment by Honduras

Repeated telephone calls seeking a comment from the Honduran Army press spokesman were not returned. The Honduran Army high command issued a brief report in 1985 largely absolving the army from responsibility for human rights abuses.

The methods described by Mr. Caballero were even more extensively employed in El Salvador and Guatemala, where tens of thousands were killed between 1980 and 1984.

It is not clear why Mr. Caballero has decided — in an extensive interview with The New York Times in Central America and subsequent interviews with members of Americas Watch, a leading American human-rights organization — to speak of his role in an army death squad. He said he felt guilty about his past and that he had a personal feud with other soldiers who had tried to kill him. He denied that he had killed or physically tortured prisoners in four years of secret work.

A spokesman for the United States Embassy in Honduras refused to comment on Mr. Caballero's charges. The United States continues to offer police training and military aid to Honduras, a State Department spokesman said.

United States Embassy human rights reports from Honduras between 1981 and 1984 appear to have consistently played down repeated instances of politically motivated killings there,

several of which included first-hand reports of police and army participation, according to an American official.

Mr. Caballero also said that in 1983 the Honduran Army captured and killed several dozen leftist rebel infiltrators trained in Nicaragua, as well as an American priest named James Carney, who accompanied the rebels.

Mr. Caballero said he had interrogated several of the rebels before they were shot to death. The Honduran Army and the United States Embassy in Honduras have repeatedly said that most of the rebels were killed in combat and that others, including Father Carney, died of exposure in the jungle.

"The orders from the army high command were to take no more prisoners," said a Honduran military official aware of the operation. "The American priest was killed."

The Honduran military official said the army high command tried to conceal the executions from the American Embassy and the C.I.A.

Mr. Caballero, who is now seeking asylum in Canada, said he returned to Honduras after his American training and worked in an army intelligence unit that he said was created with C.I.A. assistance.

He added that his American training included the use of such techniques as sleep deprivation, cold and isolation.

Mr. Caballero said captives were tortured by "as many electric prods on their genitals as necessary," he said, and by submersion in a barrel of freezing water, by sexual humiliation, beatings, living with rats and cockroaches and not being allowed to sleep.

"All talked and all were killed," he said.

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